

The problem of the sandwich started when a boy named Petey called out, Anyone wan' a baloney sandwich?

You kiddin'? Your mom must hate you, givin' you sandwiches like that.

Petey threw his brown-paper sandwich bag at the critic, Andy, and the class cheered. Fight, fight, they said. Fight, fight. The bag landed on the floor between the blackboard and Andy's front-row desk.

I came from behind my desk and made the first sound of my teaching career: Hey. Four years of high education at New York University and all I could think of was Hey.

I said it again. Hey.

They ignored me. They were busy promoting the fight that would kill time and divert me from any lesson I might be planning. I moved toward Petey and made my first teacher statement, Stop throwing sandwiches. Petey and the class looked startled. This teacher, new teacher, just stopped a good fight. New teachers are supposed to mind their own business or send for the principal or a dean and everyone knows it's years before they come. Which means you can have a good fight while waiting. Besides, what are you going to do with a teacher who tells you to stop throwing sandwiches when you already threw the sandwich?

Benny called out from the back of the room. Hey, teach, he awready threw the sangwidge. No use tellin' him now don't throw the sangwidge. They's the sangwidge there on the floor.

The class laughed. There's nothing sillier in the world than a teacher telling you don't do it after you already did it. One boy covered his mouth and said, Stooped, and I knew he was referring to me. I wanted to knock him out of his seat, but that would have been the end of my teaching career. Besides, the hand that covered his mouth was huge, and his desk was too small for his body.

Someone said, Yo, Benny, you a lawyer, man? And the class laughed again. Yeah, yeah, they said, and waited for my move. What will this new teacher do?

Professors of education at New York University never lectured on how to handle flying-sandwich situations. They talked about theories and philosophies of education, about moral and ethical imperatives, about the necessity of dealing with the whole child, the gestalt, if you don't mind, the child's felt needs, but never about critical moments in the classroom.

Should I say, Hey, Petey, get up here and pick up that sandwich, or else? Should I pick it up myself and throw it into the wastepaper basket to show my contempt for people who throw sandwiches while millions starve all over the world?

They had to recognize that I was boss, that I was tough, that I'd take none of their s----.

The sandwich, in wax paper, lay halfway out of the bag and the aroma told me there was more to this than baloney. I picked it up and slid it from its wrapping. It was not any ordinary sandwich where meat is slapped between slices of tasteless white American bread. This bread was dark and thick, baked by an Italian mother in Brooklyn, bread firm enough to hold slices of rich baloney, layered with slices of tomato, onions and peppers, drizzled with olive oil and charged with a tongue-dazzling relish.

I ate the sandwich.

It was my first act of classroom management. My mouth, clogged with sandwich, attracted the attention of the class. They gawked up at me, thirty-four boys and girls, average age sixteen. I could see the admiration in their eyes, first teacher in their lives to pick up a sandwich from the floor and eat it in full view. Sandwich man. In my boyhood in Ireland we admired a schoolmaster who peeled and ate an apple every

day and rewarded good boys with the long peel. These kids watched the oil dribble down my chin to my two-dollar tie from Klein-on-the-Square.

Petey said, Yo, teacher, that's my sandwich you et.

Class told him, Shaddap. Can't you see the teacher is eating?

I licked my fingers. I said Yum, made a ball of paper bag and wax paper and flipped it into the trash basket. The class cheered. Wow, they said, and Yo, baby, and M-a-a-a-n. Look at dat. He eats the sandwich. He hits the basket. Wow.

So this is teaching? Yeah, wow. I felt like a champion. I felt like I could do anything with this class. I thought I had them in the palm of my hand. Fine, except I didn't know what to do next. I was there to teach, and wondered how I should move from a sandwich situation to spelling or grammar or the structure of a paragraph or anything related to the subject I was supposed to teach, English.

My students smiled until they saw the principal's face framed in the door window. Bushy black eyebrows halfway up his forehead shaped a question. He opened the door and beckoned me out. A word, Mr. McCourt?

Petey whispered, Hey, mister. Don't worry about the sandwich. I didn't want it anyway.

The class said, Yeah, yeah, in a way that showed they were on my side if I had trouble with the principal, my first experience of teacher-student solidarity. In the classroom your students might stall and complain but when a principal or any other outsider appeared there was immediate unity, a solid front.

Out in the hallway, he said, I'm sure you understand, Mr. McCourt, it isn't seemly to have teachers eating their lunch at nine a.m. in their classrooms in the presence of these boys and girls. Your first teacher experience and you choose to begin it by eating a sandwich? Is that proper procedure, young man? It's not our practice here, gives children the wrong idea. You see the reasoning, eh? Think of the

problems we'd have if teachers just dropped everything and began to eat their lunches in class, especially in the morning when it's still breakfast time. We have enough trouble with kids sneaking little nibbles during morning classes and attracting cockroaches and various rodents. Squirrels have been chased from these rooms, and I won't even mention rats. If we're not vigilant these kids, and some teachers, your colleagues, young man, will turn the school into one big cafeteria.

I wanted to tell him the truth about the sandwich and how well I handled the situation, but if I did it might be the end of my teaching job. I wanted to say, Sir, it was not my lunch. That was the sandwich of a boy who threw it at another boy and I picked it up because I'm new here and this thing happened in my class and there was nothing in the courses at college on sandwiches, the throwing and retrieving of. I know I ate the sandwich but I did it out of desperation or I did it to teach the class a lesson about waste and to show them who was in charge or, Jesus, I ate it because I was hungry and I promise never to do it again for fear I might lose my good job though you must admit the class was quiet. If that's the way to capture the attention of kids in a vocational high school you ought to send out for a pile of baloney sandwiches for the four classes I still have to meet today.

I said nothing.

The principal said he was there to help me because, Ha, ha, I looked like I might need a lot of help. I'll admit, he said, you had their full attention. OK, but see if you can do it in a less dramatic way. Try teaching. That's what you're here for, young man. Teaching. Now you have ground to recover. That's all. No eating in class for teacher or student.

I said, Yes, sir, and he waved me back to the classroom.

The class said, What'd he say?

He said I shouldn't eat my lunch in the classroom at nine a.m.

You wasn't eatin' no lunch.

I know, but he saw me with the sandwich and told me not to do it again.

Man, that' unfair.

Petey said, I'll tell my mom you liked her sandwich. I'll tell her you got in a lot of trouble over her sandwich.

All right Petey, but don't tell her you threw it away.

Naw, naw. She'd kill me. She's from Sicily. They get excited over there in Sicily.

Tell her it was the most delicious sandwich I ever had in my life, Petey.

OK.

Excerpted from *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt